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ABSTRACT

In the ever-changing world of education, beginning teachers need resources to turn to as they face new, daily challenges. In a collection of 22 essays, the book's author shares insights and experiences from her first three years of teaching, using humor, honesty, and compassion to cover diverse topics. The essays can make new teachers feel like they are not alone and allow veteran teachers to reflect on their own journeys. Following a Preface, the collection contains these essays: "The First Year: Knowing Enough for Now"; "The Second Year: Another Look"; "The Third Year: One More Down"; "Memorable First-Year Moments"; "The First Day of School"; "The Most Challenging Students"; "Finding Success--One Student at a Time"; "Heartaches in the Classroom"; "Using Your Fresh Perspective"; "A Life Outside Teaching"; "Dealing with Your Students' First Teachers--Parents"; "Playing Can Be Productive"; "Planning Ahead: Avoiding the Grading Pile-Up"; "What a Difference a Year Makes"; "The Strength to Grow"; "Becoming a Mother of Many"; "My Favorite Lesson"; "The Lazy Days of Summer"; "Establishing a Support System"; "Dealing with Administration"; "Getting Involved"; and "A Sense of Relief." (NKA)

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In the First Few Years

REFLECTIONS of a BEGINNING TEACHER

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In the First Few Years

REFLECTIONS of a BEGINNING TEACHER

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Preface

WHO ELSE CAN give better advice to new teachers than a semi-new teacher herself—someone who has recently overcome many of the challenges teachers face in their first few years? Although I adored the advice from my professors in the teacher education program at the University of Iowa, on the first day of school I found myself wishing that someone had told me how I'd find the faculty restrooms and whether I should pack a lunch or buy a lunch from the school cafeteria. Most of all, I wanted someone to tell me a ridiculous thing that *they* did so that I could feel better about myself.

I am currently in my fourth year of "real" teaching. I student-taught for a semester in an eighth-grade English classroom, took a semester-long substitute position in a civics classroom, taught summer school in a study skills classroom and a remedial English classroom, and then began my "official" teaching career with seventh-grade gifted-and-talented students, seventh-grade regular (whatever "regular" may mean) students, and eighth-grade high-ability and low-ability English students. I then taught study skills

again in the summer session and have been teaching seventh-grade English for the past three years. I may be in only my fourth real year of teaching, but my experiences—like any new teacher—have been overwhelming, and I certainly feel that I have the knowledge and the background to pass on a little bit of information that new teachers would benefit from as they begin their own struggles. At the very least, I have stories that I can share that will make new teachers feel like they are not alone.

This book began as a single reflection piece that I poured into my journal during my first year of teaching. After sharing the piece with a colleague, I was encouraged to send it to *Reading Today*, the newspaper of the International Reading Association. I was surprised when it was published in full within months. Author Richard Kellough also spotted my piece and has included it in his newest textbook, *Middle School Teaching: A Guide to Methods and Resources*. The following year I was asked by the editor of *Reading Today* to do a follow-up piece that was published again. Wow. It started to dawn on me that perhaps there were actually people out there who wanted to hear what I had to say.

The result is this collection of essays into which I have poured out some of my experiences during the beginning of my crazy ride as a new teacher. My

hope is that a beginning teacher will be able to pick out advice to carry into his or her own classroom. Or perhaps a veteran teacher will be able to read my work and nod in agreement, reflecting on his or her own journey. Maybe parents will pick up this book and realize what their child's teacher goes through on a daily basis. Or, there is the possibility that perhaps this is just my spewing of feelings, frustrations, triumphs, and lessons that I need to get out of me and onto the page. Whatever the case may be, please enjoy.

—TH

The First Year: Knowing Enough for Now

AS A FIRST-YEAR teacher, I must have heard a thousand times, "Wait until winter break...," and "If you can just make it until spring break...," and "You'll be amazed at what an expert teacher you'll feel like when you return from summer break." And so *finally* I've reached summer break, and I have a chance to not do anything even remotely related to school; yet, I'm finding this desire to reflect on my first real year of teaching and where I am now in my career. I ask my students to do this all the time; shouldn't I do the same?

Well, it's safe to say that I've got the basic patterns and habits down that work for me: Put desks in rows for attendance and daily activities; move to groups or circles when necessary. Don't check my voicemail messages until the end of the day; a disgruntled parent will only vampirize all my energy first thing in the morning. Dress like a professional so that I *feel* like a professional. Laugh a lot—I mean *a lot*—because on a daily basis none of my peers get to hear a 13-year-old's amazing views on flag football statistics and what the latest nail polish trend is like

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I do. Take time for *myself* every single day—school will absolutely engulf me if I don't. Seek out a mentor and use her, test her, question her, hug her. Be nice to the copy ladies. Always remember that, first and foremost, these are 12- and 13-year-old kids, and yes, they honestly do believe that their Friday night plans are much, much more important than proper nouns and Tom Sawyer. And I also need to remember that, first and foremost, I am still just a 24-year-old person trying to balance my checkbook and send my rent check on time.

So, I've finally gotten that stuff figured out (maybe). I also don't turn down the wrong hallways any more looking for my classroom, I know where the teachers' restrooms are, I've learned to write down assignments in *at least* three different places in the classroom, I've learned that being "cool" with students doesn't make one a good teacher, and most important, I've learned that all 120 of my kids are as different as snowflakes—and that's precisely why it's not easy being a novice teacher (or an expert teacher, for that matter).

I also know what I *should* do. I know all about differentiation, tiered assignments, and learning stations. I've read a million books. I've looked at charts and plans and other teachers' lessons. I've given up my own free time

reading a cheesy mystery novel in order to review old college textbooks on educational psychology in order to be the best teacher I can possibly be.

But I also know about state standards and standardized test results and the fact that I have empty filing cabinets to pull lessons from. I know what a failed lesson looks like. I know what it means to have seventh-grade gifted-and-talented students performing at a level beyond my own, and I know what it means to have eighth graders who don't seem to know what a paragraph is—all in one day. And I know what I *should* have done—I should have had music playing, portfolios overflowing with beautiful student work, and a classroom library filled with young adult literature—it just wasn't going to happen in those first few months.

I know what it's like to have the desire to save the world and be the best teacher there ever was. And I know how crushing it is to realize that's not going to happen—at least not the first year. I know what it's like to cry at school because I'm too overwhelmed and exhausted to deal with grades and attendance slips. I know what it's like to cry before I go to bed because I can't figure out how to reach that one student.

And it was only my first year.

In other words, what I feel like I *know* is what it's truly like to be a teacher—not a good teacher, or a bad teacher, or a student teacher anymore, but a *real* teacher. I now know about the hoops we're required to jump through on a daily basis, and I now know more than ever that the salary truly, truly isn't enough (although it doesn't really matter somehow).

After my first year of teaching, I can say that I have a vision—certainly not an answer or a solution—but a vision nonetheless. I can visualize myself with individualized learning plans, a class full of students all reading different novels, music playing, and kids laughing, and behind me will be filing cabinets full of lesson plans to refer to. I can really see that. But until that vision comes true, I will strive day to day to survive, to laugh, to love, to be patient—and to move up from there. I need to feel safe in the knowledge that that is enough for now.

The Second Year: Another Look

YEAR TWO OF my teaching career is officially under way. No more summer days of sleeping in, biking, meeting friends for drinks, and staying on top of laundry, cleaning, and bill payments. Nope, it's back to waking up before 6:00 a.m. and arriving home 10 long hours later. Back to learning 120 names (not to mention keeping track of six different Tylers, three Olivias, four Johns, and two Kelseys). Back to those good ol' attendance slips, screwed-up schedules, late lunches, special education meetings, language arts meetings, parent meetings, counselor meetings, administrator meetings, faculty meetings, and team meetings. Back to that noise—the screechy teenage girl giggles, the squeaky boys, the yelling, the chaos. Back to stuck lockers, forgotten pencils, money collection, large doses of aspirin, and strict expectations. Back to lots of dirty clothes, a filthy apartment, and late bill payments. I'm off again.

But what an incredible difference a year makes. This year I can chuckle about the nuances. This year I can actually take my students on a tour of the building with confidence. I know other

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teachers on a personal basis and am delighted to see last year's students emerge as grown-up eighth graders. I have filing cabinets that actually have "stuff" in them—stuff I can pull out and massage into solid lessons. I have a lesson plan book that actually has three pages ahead of today filled in. I am a mentor for a new teacher, and I can watch her struggle through the same pain that I struggled with last year and feel assured that she will surface as a better teacher and a better person in June just as I did.

I am learning that each new year brings new challenges. My biggest challenge this year is being assigned the task of sponsoring the Cresthill Spirit Club. Why, oh why, did I agree to take on this enormous task? It's the joy of still being a novice teacher I suppose: "Yes, yes, I'd LOVE to be the sponsor...sign me up!" Thirty girls, five football games, uniforms ("Can we wear short skirts and bodysuits?"), cheers, signs, practices, fundraisers, competitions—and 120 English papers sitting on my desk patiently waiting to be read. I once heard that as teachers we don't teach subject areas, we teach students. I guess that taking on this new role at school is allowing me to teach students lessons that aren't as easily learned in my language arts classroom. Through this after-school club, I'm

teaching these girls some important lessons about responsibility, support, acceptance, and friendship. This feels pretty good.

It also feels pretty good to smile so much. My experiences from last year have helped to ease me into this long-awaited second year. This year I immediately put my students into rows, I introduced myself to the new copy lady on the first day of school, I hugged my mentor and then hugged my mentee, and I taped a large sign on my apartment door reminding myself that the rent check is in fact due each and every month. I also threw out the lessons that bombed, expanded the ones that worked, and outlined (roughly) my entire year—my *entire* year, can you imagine?

This year I've also differentiated a few lessons, I've played music in my room, and I've caught myself completely wrapped up in the craft of reading and writing more often than I'm flabbergasted with discipline issues. As a result, I graded the first set of major papers (short stories) with a smile of relief and accomplishment. There were no "and then I woke up" endings, fewer "enhanced" paper margins, and more lively verbs. I taught them those things. I also taught them that they're good writers. What started out as moans and groans

turned into "Here we go, more writing.... She thinks we're really good at this stuff." And I know they believe it because they smile when they say it.

We have also formed a nice little community of trust and fun in our classroom. Students work with different partners each day (they learned that they won't die if they don't work with their best friend); students grade, conference, edit, and celebrate one another's work; and students see me on their level. I write with my students every time that they write (not just when I don't have attendance to take or planners to sign). When I ask my students to share, I share too—and they absolutely love to share what I could improve in my writing (and they're usually right). I've set up a trusting environment. I've made it possible for my students to learn and have fun and gain confidence in themselves this year. How did I do it? I gained the knowledge and confidence in *myself* to walk into our classroom each day ready to teach and learn, have fun, and build confidence in my kids.

Now, I wouldn't exactly place the title Teacher of the Year after my name yet. I still cry because those darn attendance slips can overwhelm me when I really just want to sit and write with my students. And I still cry at night because I have that one student who doesn't believe in himself and refuses to let me

help him. I still constantly seek out help, advice, answers, and support from anyone and everyone who comes within a foot of my grasp. Every once in a while, I plan my day's lesson *on the way* to school, and yes, lessons still fail. They still fail in a big way. The big secret I've uncovered is that that's normal...that's called "being a teacher." Tah-dah. After year 25 of holding this sacred job, I hope to have fewer failed lessons and a cleaner bathroom in my apartment, but I'm not hoping for perfection in the ridiculous way that I longed for it last year.

What I'm looking for this year are the moments. The little gifts that arrive unexpectedly and remind me of why I chose this crazy profession. The student who hands me a paper and says with a smile the size of Texas, "I wrote THREE WHOLE PAGES. I've never written that much my whole entire life." The note from the mom that says, "We appreciate you." The teacher who knocks on my door and asks for *my* advice. The girl who slips into my classroom at lunch and asks me what she should do about her best friend who talks behind her back. It's those gifts, those treasures, those unplanned lessons that touch my heart and keep me going even when it's 10 degrees outside and I'm assigned bus duty. It's those seconds of unplanned splendor that allow me to buy secondhand clothes

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with a smile. That beauty that is truly teaching is what knocks me out of bed before the sun comes up each morning.

What I'm learning this year is that, yes, it's enough for now, even in year two, to have my visions of a perfect classroom with a perfect teacher leading the way. The difference is that I'm finally taking those baby steps that will make that vision a reality. If I could *picture* it last year, then I actually can begin to *live* it this year and in the many years to come.

The Third Year: One More Down

FOR THE PAST three years, I have struggled with finding the answer to how to be a teacher. The first year it began with taking attendance, arranging seating charts, and having to learn 120 names. The next year I worked on incorporating more creative units, learned to work with emotionally disturbed children, and took on "coaching" responsibilities. This year I floated out of my summer experience having completed the Denver Writing Project, refreshed and eager to implement physical movement into my English class and authentic writing into my daily plans and to take on the role of "team leader." I felt like I was getting this teaching thing figured out and that this would be the year that things would truly fall into place. I never anticipated that I'd have a student who was truly uncontrollable and who would force me to put my job on the line before fall break. I never anticipated that the United States would be rocked by terrorist attacks on a Tuesday morning in September. I never anticipated that my boyfriend's father would pass away in November.

I have successfully implemented many new lessons and practices that make me proud. I am confident that this year my students fully understand poetic devices and how to use them. I love watching my kids hunched over their journals, writing so quickly that I expect to see fire shooting out of their pencils at any moment. I've shared my own writing openly, feeling naked in front of a room full of teenagers, as I allow them to tear up my piece and find the "nugget" that I should explore further—just as I do to them.

I also stood my ground with my most difficult student. When I began to fear for the safety of myself and my students, I somehow found the strength to say, "No more." I did not know then that the strength was inside me until I found myself discussing the severity of the situation with my assistant principal the day before fall break. And I was supported and acknowledged in my stand. The student never stepped foot in my classroom again.

When the events of September 11, 2001, rocked the world, I tried to use this monumental tragedy to show my students that they could use their words to heal. As we mailed off four overstuffed manila envelopes of cards and letters filled with words of hope, I smiled at my students and their ability to share their love through their pencils. When I walked into my classroom each day after

that—unsure of what might happen next—I knew that I was in the right place...with the students for whom I had earned a college degree.

Then my boyfriend's father's illness got worse. And worse. And one day after a staff development session on how to raise our standardized test scores, I got the message that his father had died. Twenty minutes later, I stood in front of those innocent faces in my classroom and continued to teach them how to revise their writing. I did it because that's my job.

If I were making three times the money that I make now, enjoying hour-and-a-half–long lunches with adult colleagues, I probably could have snuck out for the rest of the day and grieved with Joel. If I worked in a downtown office building on September 11, I probably would have sat in front of the television next to my coworkers, soaking in the latest developments, letting the work wait until tomorrow. But I'm a teacher. And at 7:55 each morning, those bouncing children walk through my door and expect me to lead them. And so through each difficult day, I did. And I did the next day, too. And I'm going back tomorrow to do it again.

Just when I think I've got this teaching stuff figured out, I get knocked off my feet and am forced to learn yet another lesson. This year has been filled with

challenges—both professionally and personally—that I've never faced in my life, and I've been able to get through them all and continue to walk into room 134 and inspire my students to the best of my ability.

When our government leaders report on the state of emergency in our schools and announce that our classrooms are filled with teachers who show filmstrips each day, I just shut my eyes and remember what I've accomplished this year already. I am having a more productive, successful, and fulfilling year of teaching than I ever have before, and I've done it in the face of disaster not once, not twice, but three times thus far. So when our government officials complain about our standardized test scores, our lack of dedication, and our failing school system, I invite them to join me for a day and see what it's like to be in my shoes. I invite them into my students' journals where they have written profound essays on the word *freedom* and the meaning of *empathy*. I invite them into my world the day that I received that phone call about my boyfriend's father and ask them if they could turn around and inspire 120 seventh-grade students 20 minutes later—not with a filmstrip, but with authentic writing.

This career is frustrating, depressing, infuriating, and tiring. At times. But when I ask my students to share what they've just written and the entire class is

falling out of their chairs in an attempt to be chosen to read their own words, this career becomes something entirely different. It becomes inspiring, uplifting, reassuring, and refreshing. And that is why I'm still here, setting my alarm for 5:30 a.m., looking at my empty checking account, reading young adult novels before I fall asleep.

Memorable First-Year Moments

HOW WE, AS teachers, ever survive the first year in the classroom on our own is beyond me. Not only are we trying to figure out where to eat lunch, we're attempting to teach actual *live* students who need to meet standards, pass state achievement tests, and surpass their parents' expectations. It's a bit overwhelming to say the least. But if you can get through that first year and live to tell about it (and you can), the words that come out of your mouth tend to be humorous if not downright hilarious.

In my first year, I continually had my head in a book as I walked down the hallway toward my classroom. (I've always been the "Queen of Multitasking," attempting to catch up on some educational psychology while running an errand to the main office.) This meant that I would invariably look up and find myself in Mr. Johnson's classroom (while he was teaching) rather than in my own classroom next door. I'd smile, feel my face turn as red as an apple, listen to the students and Mr. Johnson giggle at my mistake (again), and turn around to enter

my own classroom, cursing myself for not even being able to locate my own room. This happened nearly once a week.

One teacher at our school who was young, beautiful, and so sweet it almost made you ache had an experience like none I'd ever heard of. Sara was teaching language arts and had one class that was filled with all the "overactive" boys on her eighth-grade team. (This arrangement was one more attempt to get these boys to learn. I'm not sure if this was the best idea, but their team of teachers was at a loss.)

On a sunny day in April, Sara stood in front of the classroom and began her lesson for the day. But while lecturing, a terrible thing happened. Her skirt fell to the ground. Literally. The drawstring around the waist decided it was time to be free, and whoosh, there went her skirt—in front of an entire room filled with 13-year-old boys. Sara lifted the skirt back up to her waist, turned, and ran like the wind straight out of the classroom. As the boys sat stunned in their seats, our principal frantically tried to get emergency substitute coverage for Sara's class. She went home for the day and swore she would never, ever come back to school again.

After some phone calls from understanding veteran teachers and administrators, Sara did return meekly the next day. What did she find on her arrival? A bouquet of flowers with a card signed from her third-period class of boys stating, "We still love you." So Sara kept on teaching and now has a great story when the question, "What's your most embarrassing moment?" comes up.

Another teacher also spoke up to help ease Sara's pain by telling of her own first year of teaching. While teaching Shakespeare, she was introducing "Puck, the faerie" and got her "P" and "F" tangled up before she could stop the worst four-letter word from coming out of her mouth. And the best (or perhaps worst) part? She was being observed by the principal that day.

There are so many stories like these. Poke around. Start asking the veteran teachers. They may not admit their story at first, but eventually you'll pull it out of them. There's always the teacher who forgets to take her students outside during the fire drill or the one who explains the magazine sale procedures all wrong. There are the first-year moments when you're sitting in meetings and you have no idea what's going on—there are lots of acronyms in teaching, and it may take a bit before ELL, ADD, ED, and SPED all start to make sense. Ask questions before you find yourself using the SPED acronym to talk about your ELL student.

We've all had those first-year moments. In fact, I still have them, and I have no doubt that I'll continue to have them for the rest of my life. But those are the moments that keep us real and keep us human. We all make mistakes throughout our lives; teachers are just lucky enough to make those mistakes in front of a room full of children. It's OK. It's expected. Laugh at yourself. Your students will have no problem laughing at you. Tell your stories. Heck, tell your stories to the students—show them that you mess up just like they do. Show them that you are human. You have to. Write down those moments, and share them again and again.

The First Day of School

ABOUT A WEEK or so before the school year starts, you'll start having dreams (or perhaps nightmares) about the impending start of the year. Perhaps you'll be naked at the front of the room, or maybe the students will all be green and purple three-headed monsters that never stop chirping. This is to be expected. You may want to avoid sleep altogether the night before school starts because peaceful dreams probably aren't going to happen. Rent some good comedy movies to numb your mind if possible and vow to get sleep *after* the first week.

Prior to your first day with students, you will be at school for four days meeting veteran teachers, trying to set up your classroom (you're going to rearrange it a million times and still never like it), getting curriculum thrown at you, and playing embarrassing get-to-know-you games with other new teachers. This is done in an attempt to make you feel more confident about the first day of school, but most likely it won't help. You'll wake up in the morning, put on your sophisticated (yet practical) first-day dress, and drive to school with bigger butterflies flapping in

your stomach than on your first day of school when you were a student. Your palms will sweat, you'll immediately want to rearrange your room—again—when you arrive, and you'll look through the class list (that you were handed that morning) and panic because you can't pronounce a single name on it.

Please remember that your students are nervous, too. They may not admit it or show it, but they are. Take it easy today. You won't be able to get anything done that you plan on getting done, so accept it and spend the day shaking your students' hands, attempting to pronounce their names, and easing everyone's tensions. I wouldn't even begin to get into curriculum or expectations at this point. You and your students have too many other things on your minds, so consider any information given out today lost by the time your students leave your room. This is when I like to play a game like the one in which we write down two truths and one lie about ourselves on a notecard, and the class tries to guess which one of the statements is the lie. Any of these get-to-know-you games are good, no-brainer ways to ease all your fears on this first day and immediately start setting up the comfortable classroom environment that you're hoping for.

The entire week will probably be a mess. The schedule will change three times as the administration sets up the schoolwide assemblies about the code

of conduct. Students will be leaving and entering and leaving your class as schedules are changed, rearranged, and changed again. You'll have to go over the school supply list, the class expectations, the money that's due, and when you need the money more than once. Instead of getting frustrated that you haven't yet gotten to the content of your class, relax and use this time to really get to know your students. You'll get to the content stuff eventually, I promise. Everyone in the whole school has to go over the same things you are, so don't worry that Mr. Kline next door is already doing science experiments and you're still collecting the appropriate dues. Go into the school year knowing that it'll be a few days (or weeks) before things truly settle down and you get into a steady rhythm. This has nothing to do with being a first-year teacher. This will happen every year. Sure, you'll think that by your fourth year you'll have this stuff figured out and you'll be able to whip through it all in two days, but it's just not going to happen. Your students need all that information (as boring as it may be), so accept it, go over it, play when you can, and learn your students' names as quickly as possible. Shake their hands at the door, ask them one interesting question, and make it your top priority to know their names within one week of

school. It's not easy, but it's so important. They deserve for you to know their names and to know them quickly.

You'll go home this first week (after the sun sets), and you'll be exhausted. Making the transition from the lazy days of summer to the beginning of the school year is rough, and you'll be wiped out. Plan ahead for take-out food or make a casserole beforehand that you can pull out of the freezer to heat up, because you'll have little energy for more than that. Find your method of releasing stress and use it this week. Maybe you need to go sweat at the gym for an hour, or maybe you need to fill the bathtub with bubbles and crawl in with the newspaper. You may want to call your friends and family and announce that you will be unavailable this week and that you'll call them on Friday after your three-hour nap. Whatever your stress reliever is, do it. Especially do it this week and make it a habit for the entire year. Never forget to take care of yourself.

We tend to get in the habit of scolding ourselves for things that went wrong—don't do that to yourself (you still will, but don't do it too much at least). As you drive home from school, sit in the bathtub, or run on that treadmill, take a minute to congratulate yourself that you're doing this job. Find three specific things that you did well today and applaud yourself. If you remembered that Tracy

likes turtles, it's time to pat yourself on the back. This is a tough profession, especially in the beginning, and it's a job that deserves to be celebrated—by you! Everyone's dealing with the same issues in their own classrooms and may forget to congratulate you on the dynamite job you're doing, so you'll have to do it yourself every once in a while. When you do something well, smile. Write it down if you can. Don't forget it for next year. Be proud of yourself!

The Most Challenging Students

JUST WHEN I thought I had my feet on the ground and was lucky enough to be entering into my second year of teaching without the mix of gifted-and-talented and seventh- and eighth-grade students, I was faced with yet another trial—Kelly and Brad, two of my students with emotional disorders who were unlike any two students I've ever seen.

Let me begin with Brad, a 6'1" seventh grader who has Asperger Syndrome, a neurobiological disorder that results in behaviors ranging from deficiencies in social skills to difficulty determining proper body space. I am 5'5" and know that Brad could seriously hurt me, unintentionally or not. Although he never hurt me, he did find joy in tickling me, and that was a very uncomfortable situation to be in. On the one hand, when Brad tickled me it meant that he liked me and he trusted me. On the other hand, being tickled in the ribs by a seventh grader is not a good thing; it is uncomfortable and inappropriate in any school environment.

In college I took a required course titled "Mainstreaming" and sort of floated my way through it. I knew that I would someday leave college and be teaching many different kinds of kids, but at the time, skipping class and getting notes from my sorority sister seemed like a much better use of my time. So basically, when Brad walked into my classroom on the first day of school, I was terrified and unprepared, although I don't know that even if I had attended "Mainstreaming" every day I would have been any more prepared.

I enjoyed having Brad in class, but I can't say that I was completely comfortable. There were times when he got out of his seat and paced and talked to himself, and there were times when he absolutely refused to do his work and would rather take everything on my desk and turn it upside down. Brad was not a troublemaker, but many times I felt that my focus was entirely on him and that the other 29 students in my classroom were losing part of me because of that.

I also had a girl named Kelly in my class that year. Kelly had no learning disability, but she was highly emotionally disturbed. She could not handle repetitive noises of any sort. Sounds like tapping pencils, whistling, clapping, or clicking tongues set her off into panic mode. First she would scream out, forcibly yelling at students to stop what they were doing, and then she would either run

out of the classroom, slamming the door behind her, or curl into the fetal position in her chair. Again, these were situations I didn't feel prepared to deal with, especially when there were other students in the class who also needed my attention.

When we enter this profession, we're handed a curriculum guide (if we're lucky), a textbook or two, a list of school policies and expectations, and a map of the building. We don't get a magic solution for dealing with students whom we're simply not prepared to handle. There is no magic solution because each of these students is as different from one another as he or she possibly can be. I will probably never have another Kelly or Brad. Next year I may have a severely mentally handicapped student or a student with a hearing disability or any number of challenges that have not yet crossed my mind. And I will be scared. Not scared of the student, but scared that I'm not doing what I should and could for him or her.

Teaching is about much more than reaching the middle group and thinking we've done enough. It's about reaching that gifted-and-talented student, that C student, that struggling student, and Kelly and Brad. All in one classroom. The closest thing to a magic solution that I can suggest is to be open and experimental. I had constant contact with Kelly's and Brad's parents, and I worked closely with

the special education department to try to figure out appropriate behavior plans. We took baby steps together. For example, we once tried putting Kelly at her own desk, away from the other students and closer to me, because we thought this was where she'd like to be. When she became unfocused because she was away from the class, we tried to move her to the side of the room, this time closer to the students, but not completely emerged in the chaos. This worked for a week. The following week we tried something else. Being open to change was essential. No behavior plan works forever, and Kelly's behavior seemed to change daily.

I needed to trust my gut. I needed to teach. And I needed to learn. These students allowed me to learn about tolerance, respect, and diversity in ways that I hadn't yet outside my classroom. My hope was that rather than feeling left out, my other 29 students were learning these things also. I think they did. Students were very careful of their pen tapping and noises when in class with Kelly, and when Brad began to panic during a classroom activity, two boys were the first to talk Brad into sitting down with them by my desk to play rock, paper, scissors silently. These students will never forget Kelly and Brad and will, I hope, enter into the outside world more sensitive of difference.

In my third year of teaching I was knocked off my feet again when Billy entered my classroom with a bang. Billy felt a need to prove his off-the-charts intelligence every chance he got. He constantly challenged my lessons by speaking out against me, and eventually he silenced the rest of the class by mocking every answer a student gave. Interventions were put into place, like rewards for only speaking out twice during one hour. Again, this worked for a while, but then Billy's behavior got worse. He began to take his frustration out on other students in antisocial and dangerous ways. For example, Billy began to pick his nose and wipe his fingers on the student in front of him. He'd also take students' papers and belongings (and mine) and destroy them. He would threaten students and began to push others, besides using inappropriate language for the majority of the hour.

Meetings with his mother were unproductive due to her frustration with the school and her belief that Billy was doing nothing wrong. Billy's behavior eventually got to the point at which he was being suspended on a regular basis. Each time that Billy returned to school his behavior got worse, and I began to fear him. I felt as though my entire time with Billy was spent babysitting, and I was unable to teach in this preventive mode. I was fearful of what Billy would do to the other students or to me if he finally went over the very slippery slope he

seemed to be standing on. His anger continued to escalate, and after feeling physically threatened one day when he got in my face after throwing another student's belongings across the room, I told my principal that I would take it no more. I provided the documentation of interventions I had tried, consequences I had given, and behaviors Billy displayed all year. Tears poured from my eyes as I described my intense fear for myself and my students.

Luckily, the principal supported me, and Billy was taken out of the mainstream classroom. He was taught on a one-on-one basis but continued to get worse. District psychologists and behavior experts were brought in, and every possible solution was put to the test, but nothing worked. Eventually, in a moment of complete rage, Billy attacked the school police officer and was finally taken out of our school so that he could get the immediate psychological help that he needed.

As frustrated as I was with Billy, he is still the one student who touched my heart the most. This child was in pain and was so severely disturbed that seventh-grade social skills were beyond him. His intelligence mixed with his deviance was a terrifying combination, and it was heartbreaking to watch him move *down* the spiral of success, despite being in a setting where people wanted

more than anything to help him. We simply could not help this child with the resources we possessed, and that was a difficult thing to watch. I first felt as though I had failed when I asked for Billy to be removed from my classroom, but in no job should you enter each morning scared for your life. I was confident that I had done everything in my power but was exhausted of any other resources. I had an obligation not only to Billy but also to my other students. By having Billy in my classroom, I was letting down these other children. I was not teaching; I was constantly trying to keep Billy in check. My administration supported me. I was lucky. I am sad that we could not help Billy, but I am so glad that he's finally getting the help that he needs. I hope he will have a positive future ahead of him once he gets help.

My assistant principal told me that he's never seen a student like Billy in his 20 years in education and the hope is that we won't see another one. Most likely we will, though. Perhaps the next "Billy" won't be as severe (I hope), but there will be another student who pushes me further than I thought I'd ever be pushed. This is part of the job—the most difficult part, much more tiring and difficult than grading papers. This is that part of the job that you can't prepare for. You'll simply face the student and deal with the situation to the best of your

ability. Document everything you do, seek out all the support that you possibly can, try any intervention you can think of, and be willing to keep trying. And when you've done it all, don't be afraid to stand up for yourself and say enough is enough. Take care of your students *and* yourself.

Finding Success—One Student at a Time

IN AN IDEAL world, I would teach students who love writing as much as I do. Students who fill journals with their thoughts and stories and share their writing with others on their own time. Students who stop and write a poem when they're out hiking, and students who have parents who write lovely letters to relatives and who turn off the television. That would be an ideal classroom. This classroom does not exist for most of us, however.

At the beginning of the school year when I walk through my classroom door, usually about one third of my students truly enjoy writing (although I'm not convinced that they turn off their televisions), a third think it's OK, and a third think that asking them to write their whole name on the top of an assignment is like asking them to write a novel. And I have so-called "good" kids who score in the top 2% of the state achievement test. In many classrooms, teachers walk into rooms where, if they're lucky, one or two students actually find joy in the written word.

The key is to make it your life's goal as a teacher to get at least one student turned on to the magic that can exist through

a pencil and a piece of paper. For me, Greg was that student. Greg had a learning disability, but he never displayed a behavior problem. He was apathetic at best. Asking him to turn in an assignment with his name, date, AND class period was expecting a lot. Greg was a sweet kid, for sure, but the thought of writing a story meant about as much to him as balancing a checkbook.

I started small with Greg. I figured that we should first focus on actually arriving to class with paper and something to write with (pen, pencil, marker, crayon...it didn't matter; it just needed to make a mark on his paper). After a few weeks of stopping Greg in the hallway before entering my room in order to double-check his supplies, we got the materials part down.

Next, I just wanted him to write. I told him I wouldn't grade his writing, and I promised him that I wouldn't put any red marks on his paper (as all his past teachers had done). I assured him that he didn't need to worry about where the commas went or when to start a new paragraph. I told him that I simply wanted him to learn what it felt like to move his pencil across his paper without fear. This may not sound like much to most of us adults who write every single day, but this was huge for Greg. Before this time, he only put pencil to paper when required to do so, and that meant knowing that what he wrote down would be

marked up, crossed out, and handed back with a red "F" on the top, if the assignment ever got handed in at all.

And so, after a bit of time, Greg was writing in his journal with the rest of the class. He actually did my 10-minute warm-ups, and it didn't appear to be too painful for him. I never graded his writing, except for completion, and I always handed back his journal with nice, blue-ink responses to "golden nuggets" in his writing that I begged to know more about.

This made Greg happy. He would read my questions and actually approach me personally to tell me the answers. I listened carefully to his words and tucked away all the things I was learning about him to pull out later to encourage his writing.

As time went on, I told Greg that I was going to start grading his work, not on grammar and spelling yet, but on the content of what he was writing because it was good and he deserved a high grade for that. He seemed a bit uneasy about this but did submit his writing to be graded. When I gave him a perfect score and told him that his information was amazing and I thoroughly enjoyed reading his story (and could I please have a copy?), he actually *smiled* in language arts class.

We moved on from there, working with the major areas of writing besides grammar and spelling (organization, voice, sentence fluency, and word choice), and I always pointed out the positives first and then conferenced with Greg on how to build his writing even more. I told him how much I enjoyed reading his words and that I just wanted more, more, more. And he wrote. No one had ever told Greg that he was a good writer. No one had ever asked to read more. Usually, teachers just wanted him to redo what he'd already done.

We eventually did move on to grammar and spelling, but we did it slowly. We revised Greg's stories first, and then we edited together, one sentence at a time. I explained to Greg that in order for others to see how good his writing was, his sentences had to be complete, and his words needed to be spelled correctly. And Greg found out that this wasn't so bad. Once he learned how to use a dictionary and what parts of speech needed to be in every sentence, he realized that he wasn't dumb at all—he just needed a boost. Most of Greg's classmates got this boost earlier in their school careers. However, lots of students like Greg miss their boost and never fully get caught up. It is our job to get them caught up.

We kept building Greg's writing and building our relationship, and then an amazing thing happened: After I gave a writing prompt in class, the students

were allowed to write for the last 10 minutes of class. Greg joined in with this task immediately and wrote more quickly than I'd ever seen him. When the bell rang and the students began filing out of the room, Greg was still writing. He did not stop. He kept going and going, onto page two and eventually page three. And I let him. When I had to start my next class, I eventually stopped Greg. He looked up at me with a smile that melted my heart and said, "Ms. Humphrey, you're going to love this. It's got an alien and a ghost and voice and paragraphs." And as I told Greg that I couldn't wait to read it, I had to speak carefully in order to push the words over the lump in my throat.

That is why I teach.

Heartaches in the Classroom

TEACHING IS GOING to break your heart more than once. When you have your first set of parent-teacher conferences and you hear how one mom puts her daughter's report card, filled with failing grades, on the front door when she has parties in an attempt to embarrass her child into improving her grades, you'll want to take this child home and make her your own. Then you'll have a student who sits in the back of the room, alone, who needs a haircut and who has worn the same jeans for two weeks in a row, and you'll want to provide him with a shower and clean clothes from your own budget. You'll have an emotionally disturbed student who is living with his grandparents because his parents are going through a terrible divorce and they just "don't want a seventh grader right now" (those are your student's own words); you'll want to put a law into effect that adults must pass a test before they can become parents. It can get much worse than that at any given moment of any given day.

Perhaps your own life will start to unravel during the school year rather than waiting for the summer—when it would be more

convenient. Maybe you'll go through a divorce yourself. Perhaps you'll face a death in the family. You may even find a lump on your body that should not be there. When you write out your lesson plans, you won't plan for any of *this*.

You could even face a national tragedy while teaching. The possibility of a student coming into your school with a gun is very real. The idea that terrorists could blow up another building, perhaps even in your own town, is not a far-fetched idea these days. A hurricane could wipe out the entire city next to you. The President could be shot.

And what are you supposed to do with these heartaches and fears as a teacher? Keep on teaching. You may not want to. You may receive that phone call from the doctor two minutes before the morning bell rings, but you've got a job to do. And you're going to be expected to do it and do it well. Parents may not realize what you're going through; they simply want you to provide the very best education for their son or daughter every single day. The students depend on you more than you know, too. At most stages in children's lives, they don't realize that their teachers are actual *people*; they only know their own problems and expect you to guide them every day. They are the center of the universe, and they won't like it if you stop taking care of them.

My advice to you when the heartaches seem overwhelming? Face them head-on. Talk about those heartaches in class if it's appropriate, seize the opportunity for students to write in their journals, reach out to those students who have never been hugged until you came along. And then use those lessons to make your teaching authentic. It's possible for your students to write about how they feel when a tragedy happens, then use that writing to discuss authentic voice and even paragraphing. Tell your students that this piece of writing should be saved as an artifact from the year and they should share it with their children someday. Make a time capsule or an anthology of your classes' work. If your students know that what they're doing is real, true, and meaningful, they will produce quality work beyond your imagination.

When your own heartaches are not appropriate to bring into the classroom, don't forget to seek care somewhere else. It is so easy to forget to take care of ourselves when we spend our entire day taking care of everyone else. It's OK to seek help inside or outside the school and it's OK to take a day off every once in a while in order to do that. You are valuable and precious, and your students need you to be well.

In life we never know what each moment is going to give us, but we must be willing to take what we get and use it to learn a lesson. Isn't that the job description that those of us who call ourselves teachers all share? Remember that you are a human being first and a teacher second. Don't push the heartaches back so far that you don't ever deal with them. Instead, deal with them to the best of your ability and embrace them when you can.

Using Your Fresh Perspective

ONE OF THE advantages that you may not have realized you possess as a new teacher, fresh out of your university's teacher education program, is your age. Now, this can work against you in various ways that you'll be well aware of (probably sooner than later); there's inexperience (you may have only been in front of your student-teaching classroom for four months prior to being on your own), immaturity (you may have no idea how to fill out your first contract or where to put your retirement savings), and lack of money (you'll need a whole new, sophisticated wardrobe and something other than that ratty backpack to carry to school). But let's not dwell on those aspects; let's focus on the positive.

You're fresh and young! You watch MTV and have seen at least one episode of the most popular TV shows. The latest superhero movie is on your top 5 list, and your CD player holds two of the top 10 CDs. You may not (gasp!) have a boy-band poster hanging in your bedroom, but you do know a few of their names. You're hip! Use it! A surefire way to get "in" with your students is to relate to them—or at least to try. There's the

conversation about the Avalanche's loss to the Red Wings you can have with Timmy, or the 12 inches of fresh powder at Mary Jane Mountain that Sara and Steve will want to discuss, or last night's award show that Janie will want to gossip about for a few minutes. Go ahead, spread your knowledge! And if you don't know, don't worry—just ask! I know nothing about snowboarding, but I am a heck of a question-asker, so Sara will sit and chat my ear off for as long as I'll let her if I keep asking her questions. She loves having a listener (just as we all do). Let her be the expert. Students may rarely feel empowered, and if you allow them to experience that, you're giving them a gift.

You need your students to learn your subject area, and eventually you'll figure out how to reel 'em in so their love for it is as strong as yours. A little secret way to help get to that place—get to know your students on a more personal level. You don't want to be their BFF (best friend forever), but you do want them to know that you're interested in them. If you care about your students and their lives, they're much more likely to start caring about you and what you care about—this may be the language arts, health, math, or history material that you want to share with them. Think about your own life. Isn't it thrilling to sit with a friend who asks you all the right questions and sits back nodding at

all the details you provide them about what your passion is? If you're able to have that conversation with this person, about something you're revved up about, aren't you more likely to return the favor to them? If they'll let you talk for 10 full minutes about your morning run, listening to their 10 minutes about last night's ballgame seems much more bearable. Use what you know in your own life as you create relationships with your students.

At the beginning of each school year, I hand each of my students a notecard and allow them to anonymously write one question for me on that card. Anything. I usually throw out the warning, "Let's remember to be polite and appropriate, or I won't answer the question," but generally I get the same five questions year after year: (1) What's your favorite band? (2) What's your favorite store? (3) What kind of car do you drive? (4) How old are you? (5) Are you married? And so I give my honest responses: (1) Dave Matthews Band and the Counting Crows (smiles from the boys in the back); (2) The Gap, J. Crew, and Target ("right on"s from the girls in the front); (3) A black Jeep Wrangler ("Coooool...."); (4) I'm younger than their parents; (5) Nope, not married. These questions lead to a few follow-up questions, and by the end of the hour, I have all their eyes completely focused on me. If I work it correctly, I can usually throw

out an interest in shopping, sports, music, drama, and food that gives me a connection (even a silent one at this point) to each student in my room. When these kids walk into my room the next day, they smile right away and mention to me that they heard the new Dave Matthews Band song last night or that their cousin is not married either. Cool. I'm in. When I then ask them to get out their journals, they'll do it without too much moaning and groaning because we've got a bond now, and they're going to give me a little bit more because of that.

You don't have to play boy-band music while your students are journaling, but just an extra 30 seconds of finely executed interest in your students and their age group will allow you to go miles with them. If you do decide to throw on one of their favorite songs for two minutes, bargain with them—tell them you'll play this song if they'll write for 15 minutes. These things work.

Eventually you will find yourself closer to the age of your students' parents rather than the age of your students. Try as you will, you will slip. I made a Get-to-Know-Your-Classmates Bingo Game where the squares on the gameboards required students to find someone else in the room who "Has one brother and sister," or "Lives in a different house than they were born in," or "Has a strange pet." To show my "hipness," I wrote in one square, "Likes Pearl Jam." This is a

good band that I thought would surely show off my coolness to my students. Suddenly, I was hearing my students saying horrid things like, "What is Pearl Jam, and why would I like it?"—as though this cool grunge band from Seattle was a type of spread for bread. Oh no. I was suddenly my mother, who put Elvis on in the car as she drove my friends and me to the mall. Eek. After a good laugh, my students convinced me to cross out Pearl Jam and substitute it with a new 16-year-old girl from Australia. Huh? When they sang the song for their old, uncool teacher, I smiled along and asked the right questions. Even better, I came in the next day exclaiming that I had seen the singer's video on MTV and the skateboarding in it was rad. I may be more dorky than cool, but I'm still trying and they love me for that. Try it. Turn on MTV and learn the new lingo—it'll take you a long way.

One word of caution—don't let this take you too far. You are the teacher, not the friend. Although getting to know your students on a more personal level can be a plus in building rapport, make sure you don't cross that invisible line that moves you away from being a positive role model. Your students have plenty of friends; they need you to be their teacher. If you don't want to cross that line, you won't. You'll know to ask the right questions at the right times (general,

pop-culture stuff rather than specific questions about friends or parties over the weekend), and the other 99% of your time will be spent teaching. Mentioning an MTV awards show, for instance, will get your students' attention, and you can then make the easy transition to work from there. Talk for two minutes about who was wearing what and then calmly say, "OK, back to work," with a smile and go to it. Your students will grumble at first, but they like you so they're willing to do what you ask them to do. On the other hand, if your students walk into class and are immediately silenced by your demanding them to get to work, the grumbling will never end.

You can easily be both a "cool" teacher *and* a good teacher. By incorporating a little pop culture into your classroom, you can be the cool teacher. When you then quickly transition into the day's meaningful lesson, you'll be the good teacher.

A Life Outside Teaching

IT'S MIDNIGHT ON a Wednesday in the middle of April. My two best girlfriends are sitting with me at the outdoor patio table. We are holding red drinks with yellow umbrellas, and multicolored tortilla chips sit in front of us in a clay bowl. We toss back our heads and snort like teenagers about the days in school when we used to introduce ourselves as Trixie, Roxie, and Lulu when meeting strangers. I am so happy here in this scene. I am not Ms. Humphrey on this night; I am Trixie. There are no papers waiting to be graded in front of me, and my sacred lesson-plan book is tucked safely away at home, far from these stories of our past. My biggest worry on this Wednesday night is that my feet are getting a bit chilly in the cool Colorado air. Otherwise, I feel good. Finally, I say goodbye to Roxie and Lulu and head home to crawl into bed at 2:00 a.m. As I glance at the clock, I quickly do the math (see, we do use math on a daily basis) and discover that in three and a half hours, this alarm is going to go off, and I will need to get up and haul myself into classroom

134 of Cresthill Middle School where I am expected to "make a difference" in the lives of seventh-grade children. Ugh.

In some professions, when this type of Thursday morning happens, you can simply call someone in the office and tell her that you'll see her tomorrow. In teaching, this is not the case. In this profession you must provide a lesson plan for days when you'll be at home tending to your aching head rather than those needy children. Once you write your first lesson plan to be left for the warm body that will take your place for a day, you'll feel like you're writing that "How to Make a Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich" paper you had to write when you were in eighth grade. Then the teacher takes your written words and attempts to follow them (in front of the entire class, of course), and you suddenly and miraculously learn about including precise, exact, and succinct details in your plans. This is not an easy task. Writing plans for a substitute is even worse than this, especially when the only thing that you feel like doing is tucking your head under the pillow for at least 14 more hours. Instead, you struggle to get to your computer, and you start typing out directions for a stranger as to how to take care of your precious students while you're at home, taking care of yourself. You must explain to your sub what to do, how to do it, where to find it, and how much

time she'll have to get it done. You'll also need to point out where the faculty restrooms can be found, that the microwave is in the lounge down the hall, that the pop machine is closed from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., and that the teacher next door doesn't like to be disturbed. Don't forget to inform your sub that Becca and Michael in your first class can help her take attendance and lead the class reading, but Robby and Sam in your last class need to be split up and shown who's in charge (her) immediately upon entering the classroom. By the way, if you're now thinking of your emergency lesson plans that you thoughtlessly (admit it) pulled together during the first week of school, forget it. Most likely, those are meaningless and the sub will never ever come back to your room if you leave her with them. A sub announcing that she'll work for anyone in your school *except* you doesn't go over well with your principal.

So it's decision time. You either whip up those plans, or you somehow manage to remove the pillow from your face and get into the shower and into that school before the sun even begins to think about rising. That's when you'll start to wonder if your old position at The Gap store is still available.

These horrendous mornings should not take place on a regular basis, but most likely they will happen every now and then. At least this has been the

case for me. I am a young woman, and I do enjoy a good late night out with my college buddies every once in a great while on a random Wednesday night.

And I love those nights. I love them because for once I actually feel my age. I can spend an entire evening not discussing or even thinking about standardized test results or Tommy's overbearing mother or working with a math teacher on how to incorporate writing into her 30-year-old curriculum. I find myself in the moment on these nights, and I let my repressed, youthful side come out and play. I sit at that patio table with my girls and laugh about what Darin said about Jackie last night when Tracy ran into him at the grocery store. It's wonderful. And the clock keeps on ticking away...way past my bedtime.

Therefore, I do not recommend making the Wednesday night celebration with your friends a weekly tradition. You chose this profession to make a difference, and nearly every single day you will do just that, even if it's just because you show up and you smile at your students. However, I do endorse having the occasional spontaneous night out playing cards with your friends, attending the local basketball game where you yell until you're hoarse, or going to the late-night poetry reading at the cafe. Stay until the end. Don't leave before you throw the last card, see the last shot, or hear the last line. It'll be tough,

perhaps really tough, to get up the next morning, but it'll be worth it. I promise. You'll probably even be able to drag yourself into school and smile at your students after you've had a pot or two of coffee. And the best part is that when your mind begins to wander, it'll slip back to the night before, and you'll feel warm and fuzzy knowing that you have another life besides this one. That is a good thing; in fact, it's vital.

Teaching forces us to grow up immediately. No more after-hours parties on Monday nights or watching The Godfather trilogy straight through on a Sunday night. No, this is one of those professions in which, during the first year on the job, you are expected to be as knowledgeable and as productive as the veteran teacher next door. It doesn't matter that you still haven't found a dentist and that you can't fill out your tax return documents correctly. It doesn't matter that you're still single and trying to find a date and that you can't even keep a cactus alive in your tiny studio apartment. It doesn't matter that your friends are still acting like college students and going to after-work events with the 30 or more other "twenty-somethings" they work with while you're attending a Building Accountability Committee Meeting in the school library. You're a teacher now.

And so, take this one little nugget of advice from me. Don't lose yourself. Every once in a while, remember who you are—the you that deserves to be pampered and nourished. Leave school at school and enjoy a late night on that patio. Even on a Wednesday night.

Dealing With Your Students' First Teachers—Parents

I JUST SIGNED up to participate in a triathlon three months from now. What was I thinking? As I flung myself around the pool today, I felt as though I was drowning a slow death. Teaching can feel like this at times. I hate to say it, but it's true. There are days when you arrive at your building, and before you can even put your lunch away, three parents are waiting to talk to you. Right. Now. Forget calling and setting up an appointment—they want you and they want you this minute. And that's when you wonder why you signed up for this mess. But you slow down your stroke, remember to breathe through your nose, and tell yourself that you just need to make it one length today. You either invite the parents to set up a time when you can meet and give them the full attention they deserve, or you agree to meet with them right then. Remember that you are a professional, though, and you deserve to be treated like one.

There even may be two or three days like this—days when you come home at night and are so physically and emotionally exhausted that you're not sure that you can do it anymore. But you

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will do it. Lower your expectations. Typically, especially in a new job, we strive to be the best at all times. This is just simply not going to happen every single day. Face it now. Even when we feel that we are doing the very best we possibly can, that big wave can roll in over our heads, and we can feel like we're drowning.

Parents can be the crushing wave that comes in and messes up your rhythm, even if you're doing a good job. Whether you teach 15 students or 160, it is very difficult to please everyone at all times. Parents can become the most difficult part of your job. I was surprised at this during my first year of teaching because I had always imagined my classroom filled with *students*; I forgot that behind each student is one, two, or more caregivers who have just as much of a role in your teaching as your students and administrators do. I try to tell myself that they simply want the best for their child, even when it feels like they're just messing up everything.

The first thing I recommend is making parents a priority right off the bat. This is the training part that makes the eventual race so much easier. Call your students' parents during the first week of school just to say hello and to welcome them into the new year. I do this with my homeroom students every year, and results are amazing. Usually I have very pleasant conversations with parents who

thank me for my call. Then I'll get the parent who hears me introduce myself as her child's teacher and immediately breaks into, "Oh no, how'd Tom get into trouble already? I warned him...." I'll politely explain that Tom has been wonderful this week (at least say he's been a good listener or a good question-asker) and that I'm simply calling to welcome the family into the new year. This is when the attitude changes. You can hear the softness come into the voice at the other end of the line, and you know that this parent has never received a phone call from the teacher that didn't start with, "Tom's in trouble." Setting this positive tone early in the year will make an amazing difference. If your first contact with parents is a positive one, making the next phone call (especially a negative one) will be much smoother.

I highly recommend the personal phone call home, but if that is simply not possible, at least send home a letter or newsletter introducing yourself, outlining the basic goals of your class, and welcoming the parents. Put this all in a positive tone. Don't break into your rules and the consequences in the letter; instead, explain that the classroom will be a safe environment where each student will have the opportunity to learn. Have students get this letter signed so that you know parents have seen it and hold onto this signature in case later

in the year, when Mrs. Smith is red with anger because she hasn't heard from you all year until the F showed up on her child's progress report this week, you need to prove that you did this. Document your phone calls to parents, also. Students can be sneaky and smart when they want to be, and they know how to erase a message before it gets to Mom or how to pretend like they're an older sister or brother who will *certainly* pass on the message. The more you document, the better off you will be; the more you train, the better you will be on race day.

The first time you meet with difficult parents face to face about something negative can be extremely intimidating. Especially if you're young. Be professional, be confident, and stand your ground. Do not apologize for your actions if you believe that you have done the right thing. Explain the entire situation fully, being very careful to not say terrible things (even if those thoughts are whirling through your head) about their son or daughter. Make sure you point out all the accommodations you have tried up to this point. Pull out all your documentation now—the failed papers, the lost behavior points, the call log marking the times you tried to get ahold of them. Also, remember this is their son or daughter and, whether they're handling the situation in the best possible

way or not, they do want what's best for their child. Explain what happened, why it wasn't a good situation, and what you've done or plan on doing to improve things. Listen to the parents sincerely and explain that you do hear what they're saying. Usually, once you're in a face-to-face environment, you'll be able to work through the issues. If you approach these parents in a positive light and are calm and solution-driven in your meeting, you're bound to have the best results. Remember to plan a follow-up phone call or meeting and honor that commitment.

Sometimes, however, things don't go so smoothly. Parents are regular people who may surprise you with their actions and words. Do not let yourself get attacked. Do not let the parents put you down. Just because you are a beginning teacher does not mean that you are not qualified to do your job. Stand up for yourself. If you know you will be meeting with a difficult parent, ask a mentor or administrator to attend the meeting with you. If you do end up alone and feel that the situation is going nowhere or is getting worse, excuse yourself and get some support or offer to meet again with an administrator who may be able to help both you and the parent. Don't get so low as to offend one another on a personal level.

Just because you are dealing with a parent who is difficult does not mean that you're doing anything wrong. If you are careful and sincere about the lessons you're giving in class and you have a reason for doing everything that you do, then you should be fine, but unfortunately, that is not a guarantee. Be prepared. Always be able to back yourself up, and if you can do that, your administration should back *you* up. You were hired because you deserve this job, and if you prove that, you should be supported. Don't be afraid to ask for that support. Get your administration involved early. Be professional and strong, and explain the situation fairly and with confidence. If you recognize that you have done something that wasn't the best idea (and you will), that's OK, too. Be honest and explain what you originally had planned, how it went wrong, and how you plan to remedy the situation. Or ask for help. Sometimes you need a partner in your training to coach you and help you change your swimming stroke if it isn't working correctly. Be open to that help. You'll do it for someone else one day.

Most important, don't let the tidal wave of parents drown you. You have a classroom full of students waiting for you. Go back to what you know. You know you're a good teacher, you know you care about your kids, you know that you're

doing the best you can on a daily basis. Keep doing that. Shake yourself out, go into your room, turn on the music, and dance with your students to get back into the groove. Because when you do have the parent who appreciates what you do and sends you a plate of cookies, it feels like you just crossed that finish line in first place.

Playing Can Be Productive

GET ON YOUR feet. Turn on some music. Dance. Play! If you play with your students, and I mean really plaaaaay, you're bound to end the day with a smile, and your students will walk out of your room learning something. It doesn't matter if you teach first graders or seniors; everyone likes to play. And if you're all having fun, the learning will come naturally.

You might feel a little foolish at first—especially if you're dealing with "too cool for school" high school students—but once you get over the first minute, your students will join you and you'll have fun. Try to learn new facts by making up a song. Let the students get into small groups to make up the song, or ask them to create it as a whole class. Stand in a large circle and pass facts around as quickly as possible. Act out anything you possibly can. Have the students teach one another. Any time that you can be up, moving around, and active, you're bound to get positive results. I still can remember the song we sang in elementary school to learn the major math functions. If I had

just memorized those facts, I wouldn't be able to tell you exactly what a math function is today.

I've had my students act out social studies facts. They write and perform the scripts and remember the events much more clearly than if they had simply read a textbook. I've had students perform fashion shows in which I read the students' notecards describing to the class their original British-era fashion, who would have worn this outfit, and why. The students love it! And better yet, I do, too!

It's fun to get up and move and play. There is no reason that school should not be fun, no matter the subject area or age. Listen carefully in the hallways later in the day, and you'll hear your students singing their new song about hydrogen and oxygen, or they'll be practicing their walk down the fashion runway in their spacesuits that will allow them to survive in a world without oxygen.

We've all spent time (lots of time) in classrooms where we were trapped in our desks and our stone-faced teacher stood behind the podium and spewed meaningless facts at us directly from the textbook. Ugh. We don't remember those facts, and we didn't enjoy our time in that classroom. Kids need to get up and move and actively engage their brains...and guess what—so do we! If you're

teaching in a setting where you'll perform the same lesson for four class periods in a row, you need to energize yourself and your lesson to keep it fresh. Incorporating play into your lessons doesn't mean any more work—it means creativity. And if you can't quite figure out how to make a lesson more creative, ask your students. They'll be full of brilliant ideas. Give your students the objectives that they need to learn and empower them to come up with a creative way to learn those objectives that they can share with the class.

Steal ideas from game shows. Students love competing and acting the parts of host and contestants. You'll all smile and forget that you're even learning. Tah-dah! There will be standardized tests and serious days of course, but whenever you have the opportunity to make things fun and exciting, do it. This works especially well at the end of a grading period or before a vacation—you and the students all will be antsy and ready to move on to important things like a vacation in Hawaii or opening presents with family. This does not mean that you have to throw out the learning and pop in the latest Disney movie. Watching a movie in class can be worse than poking out your own eyeballs, trust me. Students don't want to sit and stare at the television, especially at a G-rated movie. Use their built-up energy to make up a fun lesson. Review the lessons of

the quarter with a game show. All you need to do is provide a couple of snack-size candy bars as prizes, and every student in the room will be attentive and ready to play.

So try chanting or dancing or singing out your day's objective. Being able to do this is one serious advantage we have in this profession—use it!

Planning Ahead: Avoiding the Grading Pile-Up

IT'S TWO DAYS before winter break. Your students have been bouncing off the walls for the last week and a half...literally. They've turned into small, wild animals, unable to stay in their seats, filling their mouths with chocolate treats and sugarcoated candies. The girls are exchanging gifts like it's the end of the world, and the boys have turned to pushing and shoving one another as a way of communicating (even more so than usual). You're about to have two weeks off from school, and you have a plane ticket for 7:00 a.m. three days from now. You have a list filled with 12 gifts left to purchase, wrap, and mail before the magic cut-off date the post office has set. There are at least four loads of laundry waiting to be cleaned, ironed, and packed in your suitcase (where is that darn suitcase?). You need to have two dozen brownies baked for the school holiday party—tomorrow. Snow is blowing across the landscape, and the sky is pitch-black at 6:00 p.m. Now ask yourself, do you really feel like grading 120 essays or even 60 tests in the midst of all of this chaos?

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I did it, my other teacher friends did it, many teachers *still* do it—they plan for the final semester test to be given in the midst of utter and total chaos in their own lives, the lives of the students, the school, the entire country in general. It feels like the "right" thing to do. We had it done to us when we were students, and so we feel the need to pass along this nightmare while we're the ones standing in the front of the classroom. The truth is, you're putting the nightmare right into your very own lap. Resist. If you've planned out the semester with a little thought, there is no reason to do this to yourself.

Think about it—your students will have turned off completely for the last week of the semester. Why not plan ahead and give your final paper, project, or test the week *before*? Seriously, think about it. Are your students going to give their best performances when all they're thinking about is sugar plums and the new mountain bike they're anticipating? Would *you* be able to give *your* best performance when all you're thinking about is your mom's fudge and the new mountain bike you're anticipating? Work with your students (and yourself), not against them (or yourself). It does not make you a bad teacher to taper back before break. Say this with me: It. Does. Not. Make. You. A. Bad. Teacher. In fact, it will make you a much happier human being.

Imagine it—you'll grade the final project the weekend before the last week of school before vacation. On Monday, you'll return the projects, reflect on the work, and congratulate students for their efforts. On Tuesday, you'll introduce some sort of fun holiday project that the class will work on for the next two days. Maybe you'll perform holiday plays written by the students. Maybe you'll re-create a holiday dinner set in the 1800s. Maybe you'll design original holiday cards that the students can give to their other teachers. Ask yourself, "Are the students learning?" Of course they are! If your project is fun, they probably won't even notice that they're learning; they'll just be happy to use their energy. If you're still unsure, do a quick check and have the students identify what they're learning on paper. They'll probably come up with even more things than you thought of, and if any administrator questions you on your lessons, hand him or her the student reflections.

Imagine yourself on Thursday...the last day before break. Your students are smiling as they perform their original holiday screenplay for the class or sharing in a holiday dinner from the past. Or they're handing out the cards they've worked so diligently on for the last two days (they may even have a simile or metaphor included in them!). You'll smile at their work, do a quick-grade *as*

they're presenting, and go home at the end of the day to bake your brownies, wash your clothes, and find your suitcase. On Friday, you'll arrive at school with all the grades in the grade book (that was done yesterday during class, remember?), and you'll fill out final grade reports before the teacher next door has moved on to the second set of two-page essays that need to be graded. You'll have holiday music playing in your room, and you'll be cleaning out a few desk drawers so that you'll come back in January with a clean start to the new quarter. Meanwhile, the teacher next door is pulling out her hair and sloppily throwing grades on essays that were poorly written yesterday when the students' minds were already on break, trying to get done so that she can go to the staff party and enjoy one of your brownies. You'll talk with other teachers about how you plan on spending your break skiing with your family while she's griping about those damn essays and how she probably won't get out of here until after 6:00 p.m., and she still has to clean her house for the 12 relatives who will be arriving tomorrow morning. Who is the smart one now?

Don't give tests or final projects just because you feel you have to. Always ask yourself *why* you're giving the test. Is it necessary in determining your students' proficiency, or is it busy work that will only drive both you and your

students completely over the slippery edge you're all holding on to? If you take the time to plan a few weeks before that vacation, there is no reason that you can't wrap up the "hard" stuff while everyone's mind is still "on," thus allowing you to enjoy your students' energy rather than continually trying to stomp on it. Enjoy your own energy during this time. Life is stressful enough outside school—you don't need the craziness of school to ruin your holiday spirit. This does not make you a bad teacher. Instead it makes you one of the smartest of the bunch. You'll appreciate the lack of dark circles under your eyes, too, when your dad pulls out his camera for the annual family photo.

However, you may be in a school or a situation where the test before break is inevitable and/or required. What will you do now? You'll plan ahead. If you know you *have* to give the test, do yourself (and your students) a favor and don't plan a big project to be due the day before this test. By putting everything off until the end, you'll have two or three times the grading you're prepared for. Give yourself time to grade the projects with your full attention and time to breathe before the test (maybe you'll even get your holiday shopping done early), and be prepared for the effort grading the test will require. Get your other stuff done before this. For example, things like preparing the lesson plans for your

return from break or cleaning out a desk drawer or two can be done and over with so you can concentrate on the grading at hand. Then you can get out the door knowing that you can fully enjoy your break without having to miss the family game of Trivial Pursuit because there are projects to grade or lessons to plan. Use the Boy Scout motto of "Be Prepared," and your school breaks will be the time to relax that they're intended to be.

What a Difference a Year Makes

THE FIRST YEAR that I taught, I was handed a vocabulary book (during the third quarter—we had to get the money from the students before we could order them) and told, "Use it." I panicked. There were 20 words in each unit. There were 20 units in the book. After every third unit, there was a unit review followed by a larger review of the last six units. *I* didn't even know some of the words! Until that point, vocabulary lessons in my room were given in an authentic setting, while we were working on something else. I'd introduce about five new words a week, have students create flashcards with pictures and funny sentences to help them remember the word, and then I'd give a short quiz every once in a while to check their retention of the word. Admittedly, vocabulary on it's own was not a big focus. Now I stood in front of my students, handed out these little orange books ("Please put your name in permanent marker everywhere you can!"), and explained our new vocabulary program. As Johnny took out his Sharpie and began to write his name on every single page of the book, the other students began

to flip through the pages and groan openly at the textbook-looking thing that was about to replace our very relaxed vocabulary program.

We did a unit a week. Yup, 20 new words a week. Definitions, parts of speech, synonyms, antonyms, and pronunciations. I mostly assigned the work as homework because we simply did not have time to do this kind of work in class. I handed out the tests on Friday and wasn't surprised when the students did poorly. So, I put on my stern teacher face and told the students that they were going to need to work harder. "Study five words a night," I stressed. "Make flashcards!" I yelled. "This is a big part of your grade," I threatened. Week two was no better. In fact, I believe it was worse.

What was I going to do? I was handed this book, told to use it, and I only had 45 minutes a day to divide between reading, writing, and now a separate vocabulary unit. I kept pushing. I required flashcards for students who failed tests, I offered extra help before and after school (only two students showed up), I called home to beg for support. Week three was worse. The review test was downright heartbreaking.

But I got through the entire book, darn it. I marched up to my department head, showed her the completed book with pride, and when she asked me how

it went, I burst into tears. My students had not retained one single word from the book. The little orange cover became a sign of evil when I asked students to get out their books. Parents could not believe the amount of work that I was requiring at home when until that point I had been so reasonable. I was mad—mad that I had to use this book and even more angry that I had failed so miserably at the task.

My department head patted me on the back, just as she had so many times that year, and applauded my efforts. She then asked me what I would do differently next year. For starters, I'd want the book at the beginning of the year. Next, I'd break down the lessons to only 10 words per week...20 words was simply too much. I'd also cut out the "accent mark" portion of the test because I couldn't understand why students needed to know which syllable was stressed on top of knowing the spelling, definition, and part of speech. I told her that I thought the words were valuable, but the set-up was a disaster. I then sat back and waited for her to tell me that she was sorry but that I was just going to have to deal with it. Guess what? She didn't say that. She gave me a little smile and recalled her own first year of teaching, when she did everything that was given to her, no questions asked. She then explained that she had used the very same

book as I had (it was a schoolwide requirement) this year but had gotten through only the first 10 units. Like me, she felt that the "accent mark" part was ridiculous so she threw it out. Threw it out? You can just throw it out? I was astonished. "Yes," she exclaimed, "Throw it out!" If 20 words are too many, teach 10 like she had. Teach the other 10 the following week. It's OK, she said. "Is it more important to get through the entire book or for your students to actually learn new vocabulary?" I stated the obvious answer but said that I thought that I had to get through the entire book. "Oh Tina, bless your heart—you'll learn." And then she vanished like the grand Wizard of Oz, and I was left speechless, holding this little orange book that had nearly crushed me for the entire second half of the year.

I began to understand. I had just come from the university where I was continually doing what I was told to do. I was now in a profession where I wasn't told much, just handed a few resources to use. I was trying to do it all. I wanted to be the best. In my mind, being the best was getting it done. I knew that my students weren't learning, and I knew what I wanted to do; it just never dawned on me that I could change things. This is going to happen to you, too. You'll be in your 10th year of teaching and look back and chuckle on the things you

used to do. I don't know when it happens, but someday the confidence fairy will come and sprinkle magic powder over your head, and you will learn the valuable lesson that is at the heart of teaching: Always ask yourself, what is the best way to allow my students to learn to the best of their ability? Getting through the most vocabulary words did not make me the best, nor were my students any more knowledgeable of vocabulary.

The following year, once again we did not get our books until third quarter. However, I knew they were coming, so from the start of the year I set up our vocabulary unit to mirror the book so as not to "shock" my students later in the year. I also focused on only half the words per week, thus taking twice the time to get through the book. I even learned to incorporate a little bit of fun with these dry, SAT-test type words. For example, if I heard the students using the words correctly (without the aid of their books) outside class, I'd award them an extra point. Suddenly the hallway was filled with conversations like, "Is Mrs. Langer's class the one that is *adjacent* to the cafeteria?" or "I wish they'd *decrease* the amount of homework we have on the weekend." I also tried to immerse the students in their new words, cutting out magazine articles that used their words (and asking them to do the same) and handing out each week's list to the elective

teachers and asking them to use the words whenever possible. We spent 10 minutes on Fridays playing a review game, which the students created in a contest to make up the best review game. And when the tests came around, my students did well!

At the end of my second year, I handed the book to my department head and announced with a show-off smile that I had completed only half the book. She gave me a high-five and told me I was becoming an official teacher. I beamed.

The Strength to Grow

I HAVE THE greatest little window. It's part of what you'd call the charm of my tiny apartment in Denver. The window is in my bathroom—in the shower, actually. That window is my favorite thing about my place. Nothing feels better than a hot, scalding shower in the middle of winter when I have that little window open a crack, creating steam around the snow that has piled up on the outside ledge. In the summer, it's open all the way in an attempt to catch some sort of breeze so that I won't sweat for at least the 10 minutes that I'm in the shower.

The first day of transition from winter to spring is when my little window shines, however. When I can pull the opening a bit wider and smell the world thawing out, I smile. A rite of passage. A change from one season to another.

I have a tendency to think of my students around this time. My seventh graders—who are now very close to being eighth graders—have done their own thawing out over the year, too. These students who started the year as tight little buds, too scared to blossom fully, were paralyzed with fear at having to open their own lockers, meet

seven new teachers in one day, and carry a daily planner. During the first few months, I opened their lockers for them, understood when they were late to class, and provided new planners to students who had already lost them.

And then winter hit, and my students seemed somewhat frozen in their seventh-grade selves. They decorated their lockers with posters of rock stars and stickers sporting skateboarding logos, they had secret nicknames for their teachers, and they remembered to bring their planners to most classes.

And then I pull that window open in my shower, smell spring pouring in, and realize that my students are beginning to bloom—finally. They're not seventh graders as much as they are mini-eighth graders. They're rigging their lockers so that they'll automatically pull open—thus allowing more time to talk to their friends between classes. They've learned which teachers are pushovers, who gives pop quizzes, and who will allow them to sneak gum in class. It's amazing.

In my classroom, I look out at this bed of little flowers that I've followed for nearly nine months. The student who carried every single one of his textbooks to every class for the first month of school because he couldn't deal with his locker is now using the locker pass to go back and get the notebook he forgot in locker #1247. The student who sat in the back of the class, silent and

sullen, is now being moved to the front so she'll stop flirting with the football player who sits across from her in math class. The planners are diaries of their days—from blank pages to daily teacher signatures proving to Mom and Dad that, yes, the homework assignment they've written down is correct.

I remember watching the steam pour through my shower in the fall and thinking, "How will we ever get through this year?" And now I pull my window open all the way and sigh because my students will be saying goodbye to me in a few short months. These little flowers will be growing roots that will ground them to their true selves for the rest of their lives. Every time I heard myself say, "Let me see your planner," or "Wow, what an amazing story," I sprinkled some water onto my students in order to give them the strength to grow.

These little buds came in at different shapes, sizes, and styles. And they'll be leaving with just as many variations, but they'll be taller, maybe wear a little lipstick, and smile more.

When I close my window a bit in the fall, I'll gladly welcome the new little buds into my classroom and daydream about the day that I get to pull my window open and push my flowers into the world (or at least into eighth grade).

Becoming a Mother of Many

HOW DID I ever end up being single and 26 years old in a profession in which I'm handed 120 12- and 13-year-olds in August and told, Not only do you need to teach these students how to read and write, but you'll also need to be their mom for the next nine months?

The first year that I began teaching, at the fragile age of 23, I focused on being a professional. My teacher-preparation classes had prepared me for this well. I knew to start my language arts classes with a warm-up grammar activity so that these puberty-stricken boys and girls could settle down and I could take attendance. I also knew to have strict rules and guidelines. I remember college professors stating, "Middle school students need rules and regulations; they need to learn about strict guidelines so they'll perform properly as adults in society."

Then Eric walked into my classroom, and his body odor forced me to wince. I didn't know what to do, so I kept doing what I'd been taught. I took five points off his grade each day that he came without a notebook or pencil, even when he told me he

didn't *have* a notebook or a pencil. I got stern when he neglected to turn in his essay on Monday, and I wouldn't accept it for points when he handed me his crumpled paper on Wednesday. Students need rules, regulations....

I got through all the required language arts standards, the entire vocabulary book, and all the required reading that year. Veteran teachers were astonished. I felt proud. I had implemented rules and regulations and given my students those strict guidelines and passed them along to eighth grade.

The next year I had six "Erics" in front of me—no pencils, no notebooks, no showers. I called conferences with their parents and learned that Tommy's mom didn't have time to look at her son's homework because, after all, she'd already "done" seventh grade and wasn't about to do it again. Besides, she was busy dating and getting back "out there" after her recent divorce.

I also met Sara's dad, who decided he'd come sit with Sara in class every day in order to embarrass her into improving her study habits.

Steve came into my room wearing the same outfit for two weeks straight.

I went home and I cried.

Suddenly "rules, regulations, and strict guidelines" seemed ridiculous when I was standing in front of students who didn't shower, didn't own any school

supplies, and had no one waiting for them when they got home from school.

I then found myself pulling Steve aside and explaining to him that he could shower in the locker room before school in the morning and that we could ask the life management teacher to let us wash his clothes in the school's washer and dryer.

I tutored Sara after school so she could pass her classes so her dad would go back to work and she could be a normal seventh grader.

I hugged Tommy and allowed him to write about his sorrow over his parents' divorce and his mom's new boyfriends, and then I introduced him to our school counselor so he could get some help.

Suddenly I was extending deadlines for students who were up all night babysitting their younger siblings because their mother didn't come home. I bought notebooks and pencils by the ton and passed them out to empty-handed students. I gave hugs to students who hadn't been hugged in years.

I became a single mother of 120 kids. I learned that *teacher* is a blanket title for a job that requires you to be a mother, too.

I still provide rules and regulations because kids certainly need those things. But I now provide so much more than that. I now know that in order for students

to "perform properly as adults in society" they must first be loved. And so that's part of my job, too. I'm still concerned about the language arts standards and the vocabulary books, but my pride at the end of the year doesn't stem from my ability to get through the required curriculum—it comes from the students who move on to eighth grade with a little more confidence and a few more life skills that will help them learn and live and love.

My Favorite Lesson

Dear Students,

It's 10:00 p.m. on a Tuesday night, and I'm thinking about you guys. I'm thinking about our days together and all the things that I want you to know. Day after day, you listen to me tell you to sit down, spit out your gum, pull up your pants, write in your planner, and remember to turn in your progress report. I ask you to learn 20 new vocabulary words every two weeks (and beg you to please not use "retard" in the way that you'd like to), and I constantly test your knowledge of figurative language by asking you to identify what I just used when I said, "You're as loud as fireworks on the Fourth of July today." I make you read, read, read, read, and write, write, write, write. I grade you on your behavior and your ability to work in groups. I have you become interrogative sentences and tell you that you can only ask questions for 15 minutes. I assign poems where you need to become William Carlos Williams and write about why "so much depends upon" your curling iron or worn-out toothbrush. Each day that you walk into my classroom, I expect the world from you and keep pushing you and pushing you

until you get it. I may not say it enough, but each one of you gives the world to me each and every day, so I'm sitting here thinking of you at 10:00 p.m. on a Tuesday evening.

I met someone at the gym today who asked me what I did for a living. When I told him that I was a seventh-grade teacher, he immediately twisted up his face and asked, "Why?" Can you imagine? He actually asked me, "Why?" I told him, "Because I love it." And while that's true, I wanted so much to tell him everything that I was thinking. I was thinking that I do it because I love you guys. I love your age. I love that you flop into the classroom one day and never open your mouth and then the very next day, you leap back in and never shut your mouth. I love that at the beginning of the school year you sit alone at your desk, feeling that you'll never find another friend because this stupid school put all of your friends on another team, and then three months later I have to separate you from your six new best friends because you can't stay on task when you're together. I love that when we started the poetry unit, you groaned at me and rolled your pretty eyes, and a month later you asked me if you could write a poem for your book review assignment. I love that you've joined the football team or the cheerleading squad or the German Club. I love watching you grow taller than me in a few short months. I love that when you get an A on

your paper, your face lights up brighter than the sun, and when you get a D you put your head down and promise me to try harder next time...and when you do—and although it may take more than one attempt, you usually do—then you make my year.

I chose to teach middle school because you're the most fragile age there is. At this time in your lives, you're forming your adult personalities, and I'm so lucky to be a part of that. I'm so lucky to see you every day and throw rules at you because those rules will make you better people. So many adults are scared of you guys...terrified, in fact. You may not know it yet, but you are scary, scary beings at this age. You're scary because you're so unpredictable. Just when I think I've got you figured out, you go and do something so out of the blue that I'm floored. And that's why you're not scary to me—you're precious. You're growing into adults right before my lucky eyes.

When I go home at night, I go home to an empty apartment. I have no children of my own. But I am fulfilled. Fulfilled because in actuality, I have 120 squirrelly children. I spend the majority of each day with all of you and you fill me up. I have gone through three major crises this year that could have shut me down completely. Instead, I got up each day and came to you guys because I knew that you would keep me going. When I walk into the classroom and see you acting out

"A Dinner Party" and yelling out the elements of the plot chart as you perform, I am healed. When I see you giggling and acting and learning, I know that I am in the right place. I push back my own personal struggles until I get home at night because I don't want to miss a single minute with you.

In the grand scheme of your life, you and I will share but only a moment. It is my hope that this moment that we're in will make a difference in your lives. I hope that you take your secret love of poetry or your knowledge of Harry Potter or your journal with you as you move above and beyond room 134 and do something magical with your life. Each and every one of you is a miracle, and I am blessed to be a part of you. You are the fourth group of students to come into my world, and I will not forget a single one of you. As I sit here thinking of you on this Tuesday night, I am smiling.

Thank you.
Sincerely,
Ms. Humphrey

THIS IS A letter I gave to my students this year. I was terrified to do it. After turning in their vocabulary tests, I asked them to pick up this handout and read it over while waiting for everyone to finish their tests. Those were the only instructions I gave. I then sat back and waited for their reactions. I saw smiles as they read the line about *retard*, and I saw perplexed looks as they tried to figure out why I had written this letter and if they would be tested on it. When they were done, they sort of looked up at me and smiled. Imagine that—I shared an individual smile with seventh graders through writing. A few students came up and asked if I wanted the letter back and when I told them no, it's a gift, they smiled again. I watched as they opened their folders and carefully put this purple sheet in a safe spot (just as I wish they'd do with every handout).

When everyone had finished reading, I stood at the front of the classroom (feeling buck naked) and waited for some responses. One student asked, "You live in an apartment?" At first I felt irritated by that response—here I had poured my heart out to these children, and all Andy got out of it was that I lived in an apartment.

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But then I saw the look on his face and realized that he had picked out that detail because I had shared something personal with him, and teachers rarely feel safe enough to do that. He liked that detail. And so I told him, "Yes, I live in an apartment, and it has the ugliest brown carpet you've ever seen." The class laughed and more comments started rolling in: "Did you write this yourself?" "What gym do you work out at?" "Do we need to have our parents sign this?" And finally, "Thanks, Ms. Humphrey." "Yeah, thank you." Ahhhhh, a thank you. Heaven.

I did not have my students write me back this time. The joke's on them, though, because I will. I'll do it because when students write letters, they find their voice. They'll also learn the format of a friendly letter and be expected to edit and revise it. I'll also build up a rapport with some of the quiet students who are more comfortable sharing things on paper than through their voices. And that is what every teacher needs to survive in a classroom of squirrelly kids—a connection. They'll be learning but won't even know it, and that's the best kind of learning there is.

Later in the day another teacher approached me and asked, "Did you write your students a letter or something?" I couldn't quite tell where he was going with his question.

"As a matter of fact, I did. I just gave it to them today."

"What'd it say?"

"Not too much, just a thank-you note of sorts."

"Well, it must have been more than that because they were all talking about it today and showing it to other students today in my class."

"Really? In a good way?" I asked in happy surprise.

"Yup. Nice job. They're actually *reading*. Would you mind putting a copy in my mailbox sometime?"

"No problem. Thanks, John."

My cup runneth over....

The Lazy Days of Summer

IT'S THE 10TH of July, my cheeks are sun-kissed, the post-news, five-nights-a-week rerun TV show that normally signifies that it's way past my bedtime is on, and I'm not planning on even setting my alarm tomorrow morning. No, I'm just going to get up when I get up, grab my bike, and hit the trail. I feel good. It's summer. Whether we'll openly admit it or not, summer is certainly one of the top selling points for our profession. This is time for you. You, you, and more you. This is your time to find your green thumb or your new thighs or that other job that may allow you to buy that DVD player you've had your eye on. At the very least, hit that snooze button. Twice, if you can.

By about the second or third week of freedom, you'll look in the mirror and realize that the bags have disappeared from under your eyes, your hand gets tired just writing out a check, and your nails have grown past the tops of your fingers. Wow. You'll be sitting by the pool listening to the children playing and splashing and fighting, and you'll smile knowing that you can keep reading your book because today those kids are not your responsibility.

Or you'll be painting a house for a client who brings you lemonade. Or you will be babysitting the neighbors' dogs or working the cash registers in the express lane at the corner store. You may even be in your classroom, teaching summer school for a week or two. Yes, you'll be working, but it will *feel* different in the summer. Even in the classroom, the mood changes when the sun is beating down on the windows and your bike is your mode of transportation to and from school. The pressure is off in a way that can hardly be described in words. Summer is magical in this way. The change in your schedule, the change in your environment, scenery, and mind makes the heat of the day feel like a refreshing breeze.

I recommend taking a vacation if you can—at least get in the car on a Tuesday and stay away until Thursday. Go to the grocery store in the middle of the afternoon and leisurely pick out your watermelon now that you have time. Clean out a closet or two. Have a garage sale and use the cash to buy flowers for your window ledge. Take a class to learn how to play tennis or knit or dance. Be the student!

Enjoy your time off when you can, even if you're working another job. You deserve it. You've worked hard this year—harder than you ever even imagined—and it's time to pamper yourself for longer than a three-day weekend.

At least give yourself two or three solid weeks of "you time" before or after your summer job. Read a brainless magazine—heck, turn on a daytime talk show if you'd like—just do your own thing.

Eventually, when you're getting antsy and the school supplies start to arrive at the discount stores, the upcoming school year will begin to creep back into your mind. This is the time to reflect on your last year and start thinking about how to make your life easier in the year ahead. Look at your journal or your lesson plan book and congratulate yourself on the lessons that worked and decide where you'll use them this year. When you run across a lesson that didn't work (and there may be quite a few of these), find the humor in the attempt and decide how you'll improve it for this year. Jot down notes. Perhaps outline units in your calendar so you can walk in on day one and feel like you have some sort of direction.

Unfortunately in this career, you're probably not going to hit the point where you look back over the last year and feel confident in your announcement that "That was a perfect year. I'll just do exactly what I did last year, this year. Tah-dah!" Even if you do have yourself one terrific year—and you will—it won't ever be repeated just exactly the same way the following year. You change,

your students change. Heck, your students change from one class period to the next, even if they're all labeled the same age and ability group.

Don't spend your entire summer agonizing over the mistakes you may have made. Don't set up your entire lesson plan book so that you can pinpoint exactly what you'll be doing on December 16th. This will backfire for sure. Instead, take your journal and sit in the sun for an afternoon and do some reflecting. If something worked, figure out how you'll use it in the year ahead. If you'd like to try something new, take a few notes on how you'll do that—you don't need a minute-by-minute lesson plan, but some sort of direction will make life easier for you next year.

I do recommend thinking through and setting up your first week. The entire thing. Minute by minute. Decide on how you'll do introductions, how you'll arrange the seats, how you'll organize supplies, and what you want to accomplish during the first five days. Your memory may be blurred at this point, but the first week is chaos. Students are changing classes, parents are in your face, you're attempting to memorize a bazillion new names—the less planning you have to do this first week, the better. Go in one day early and make your copies so that you're not one of the sweating, swearing teachers kicking the copy

machine two minutes before class is supposed to start. Your plans will probably change, just like always, even in this first week, but it's easier to make changes than to create plans from scratch when you have 99 other things scrambling your brain. Take one week at a time.

It won't take you too long to do this, and you'll be much better at it once you've relaxed yourself. For a little while, vow to do nothing remotely related to school. It's OK, don't feel guilty. You spend nearly every minute of every day with school on your mind, so as much effort as it requires to stop that, stop that. Get back to you. You deserve it. Hit snooze. The plans can be done at 3:30 in the morning if you so choose.

Ahhhhhh, the lazy days of summer. Run through a sprinkler, lick an ice cream cone, clap at the fireworks, and forget about your lesson plan books for a while.

Establishing a Support System

I AM LUCKY enough to work in a school district that provides a building resource teacher for our school. This job includes duties such as planning staff development and leading numerous committees, but most important, this job includes the precious duty of mentoring new teachers. If I had not had a mentor during my first year, I would have left my classroom in October and never come back. After weeks of meetings, creating lesson plans to be reviewed by my administration, and late nights spent grading papers and creating lessons, I finally hit the wall. I sat at my desk during planning time, looking at the never-ending piles that were growing right before my eyes, and my heart began to beat much too quickly for a normal person. I was tired, hungry, and I had a migraine. I had felt this way for the past two months. I could not take it anymore. During my planning time, my room was used for a health class, and as the students' volume continued to rise, my patience erupted, and I found myself aimlessly walking down the hallway looking for an escape. If I didn't find it by the time I hit the front door, I was going to go

out and never come back. This is when my mentor walked up to me, asked me if I was OK, and my tears began to flow.

MaryDee pulled me into her office, shut the door, grabbed the Kleenex, and said, "Cry." I did. I didn't even say one word for a good five minutes as she rubbed my back and whispered, "I know." As I finally started to get myself together and explain that I simply wasn't cut out for 12-hour days and this job called teaching, she just smiled at me and said again, "I know." I didn't understand. I felt like a failure. I was two months into my dream job and I was falling and failing fast. I thought that I would be Teacher of the Year by this point. I thought that student teaching was the hard part and once I got my own classroom, I'd begin to "get it." I thought that the first week would be the worst, but then things would begin to fall into place. But here it was, October, and nothing was falling into place. Nothing. My lessons were failing, I still wasn't sure what ILP stood for, and I had forgotten to pay rent for the past two months.

MaryDee spent the next hour explaining to me that I was normal. That this is what happens to nearly every new teacher. That this is why *she* had a job. She was the new teacher mentor because new teachers needed support and lots of it. She explained to me that what I was experiencing was normal and

exactly right on. She managed to get me to see that the fact that I was sitting in her office crying meant that I was on the right track. It meant that I cared, and that's the number one requirement for a teacher. If I didn't care, then when I hit that wall today, I would have simply stood up, brushed myself off, and gone to the classified section of the local newspaper. Sitting in her office, crying, and asking for help meant that I *did* care and that I did want to succeed, and this was the first step.

I liked what MaryDee was saying, but I was still exhausted, overwhelmed, and scared. I was nodding politely, attempting to smile, and blowing my nose. She got up, went to my classroom to get my purse and my coat (no papers, no grade book), and she hugged me and sent me home. Her direct orders were to go to bed and not to come back tomorrow. She explained that I was no good to my students if I wasn't first good to myself and that having a substitute tomorrow would be OK. She pointed at me and said, "I know you, Tina. You'll try to show up here tomorrow and teach, and if you do, I'm going to just send you home, so you may as well save yourself the trip." I crawled to my car, to my apartment, to my bed, and I slept until noon the following day.

When I woke up, I made myself some coffee and I sat on the couch with a notebook and began to reprioritize. I figured out what I needed to do first, what could wait, and who to ask for help once I returned to school. I felt better then. I had more of a sense of direction than I had had for the last two months. I hadn't given myself the time to breathe until this point, and when I did breathe, I gained a fresh perspective and felt ready to go back and try this teaching stuff again. One more time.

I did go back, and it was hard, and the weeks after that were hard, too. The first year is just hard, period. I hit more walls, for sure, but that happened less and less as I finally got into a routine. I survived because I wanted to and because more than anything else, MaryDee hugged me and told me I was normal on that afternoon in October. She was my angel who kept me running.

Everyone needs a mentor. I hope your school or district provides one for you who is as caring and supportive as MaryDee. If not, find one on your own. Seek one out. There will be *someone* in your school to whom you can go when you need to cry or laugh or reflect. If there is no one, you may need to consider teaching at another school.

It's good to have a support system set up outside of school, but it's vital to have someone in your school who knows *exactly* what you're going through and who will help guide you as you grow. Someone who knows who to ask for the information on the upcoming testing period or where the hidden coffee is located. Someone who doesn't feel put out by your questions or concerns. Let him or her hug you and help you and guide you. This is not a bad thing. This does not mean that you're failing in your career; this means that you need guidance and support, and that is normal. Remember this in a few years when that new teacher is aimlessly walking toward the front doors and repay the favor.

Dealing With Administration

ADMINISTRATION. THE BOSSES. The heads of the school. The ones with the big offices and the secretary. They hired you; they can fire you. How do you deal with these people? My recommendation—keep 'em on your good side. When you interviewed for your teaching position, an administrator ultimately hired you. You were hired because you proved yourself as a positive addition to the school, and now your administration is expecting you to live up to that challenge. Do it.

Remember that your administrators have a tough job. Realize that their responsibilities go well beyond the obvious. Not only are the administrators responsible for the entire staff (this includes the cafeteria workers and custodial staff), they are also obligated to their supervisors at the district level, the parents, the community, and like you, the students. The school is their company, and it needs to run smoothly, efficiently, and productively. When standardized test results are published, the results ultimately fall on the shoulders of the principal. If a student gets hurt on the playground, the principal provides the

statement to the parents and the media. If a teacher is performing below expectations, the principal handles the situation. School schedules, maintenance, purchases, and assemblies all need to be approved by the administrators. Keep this in mind.

Ideally, you should have a positive relationship with your principal and assistant principal. I hope that when you were hired you met a team of administrators who you believed in and respected just as much as they believed in and respected you. During your first few years of teaching, you need to prove yourself. You know this. You're proving to your students, parents, colleagues, and yourself that you're a good teacher. You're also proving this to your administration because your job rests in their hands. How do you do this? When there is a meeting, you go. When there is a request to turn in your lesson plans, you do it. You arrive early. You stay late. You ask questions. You are friendly and stop to say hello when you pass your principal in the hallway. You come up with a fantastic idea for an assembly, and you set up an appointment and present your idea to your principal. Your students love you, and your principal knows it. Your students' parents don't call to complain that you don't communicate because you do, and your principal knows it. You are professional.

You don't badmouth your administration or fellow teachers in the teacher's lounge, even when others are.

As in any job, be open with your administration. If you're having trouble, ask for help or ask who can help you. Your principal hired you because she believes in you and wants you to be successful. Principals love students as much as you do and believe in education and schools just as you do. Most likely, they were teachers themselves and understand what the first few years are like. Don't be afraid. When I had that uncontrollable student in my class, I immediately went to my principal for help, and she listened and made the necessary changes. If you have an excellent lesson, invite her into your classroom to observe it—my principal loves to watch my students perform in drama lessons. If your students produced incredible projects, show them to your administration. Many times the bosses are only aware of the bad things happening in the school because they are expected to fix things. When good things happen, your administration should know. Tell them! They should celebrate with you.

If your principal is a scary, three-headed monster who hasn't smiled at you since February, my advice is the same as if your principal is an angel sent to

make your life heavenly. You still go to meetings, work late, love your students, and turn in your lesson plans. You may not be friends with your principal, but you can have a good working relationship nonetheless. If that isn't working, turn to your mentor for some advice. It is important to feel supported by your administration, especially if you know that you are doing the very best job possible. If you've tried talking to your principal and nothing seems to be working, think about finding a school with a better match. Remember when you're interviewing that you need to be right for the school just as the school also needs to be right for you.

Getting Involved

NEW TEACHERS SPEND a lot of time tucked in their own classrooms, frantically working on lesson plans, grading, and developing new classroom management strategies. You may even become a coach or a club sponsor, thus spending even more hours with students, getting to know them in a new way. This is great, but it's also important to get acquainted with your colleagues both on a social level and a personal level if at all possible.

I started a book club for teachers at my school last year and it's wonderful. Once a month we meet at a local restaurant to discuss our latest book and, better yet, to get to know one another on a personal level. This time outside of school is invaluable to me, and I feel a true bond and friendship with the 20 other teachers that join me each month.

Our school's social committee (an excellent committee to be a part of, by the way) sets up happy hours, baby showers, wedding showers, and holiday parties that allow the faculty and administrators an opportunity to come together as adults and

appreciate one another. Many times we'll get to know the teachers we team with and our department members, but the chance to cross paths with colleagues in other areas isn't as easy. This is why it's a good idea to take advantage of these social opportunities. Not only will you meet more amazing people who share your own love of learning and teaching, you'll find more resources to turn to for help in various areas, and you'll feel a real connection to your school.

Don't be intimidated as a new teacher to join these clubs and attend these events. Your veteran teachers truly want to get to know you, I assure you, and they will be impressed at your ability to jump in and get involved.

You may feel like you've got too much to do to go to the local restaurant for a happy hour, but you can do it. You should do it. These two hours spent with colleagues outside your school can make such a positive change in your career and life. You may even find a couple of people that you'll really hit it off with, and before you know it you'll be spending the weekend hiking with these friends while wearing your school's T-shirt. We beg our students to become involved in a sport or activity at the school; we need to remember to take our own advice.

A Sense of Relief

SCHOOL STARTED THIS week. My fourth year. Four days of meetings, hanging up new posters, sharpening pencils, hearing about my colleagues' summer vacations, and more meetings. The kids arrive tomorrow. I'm ready. Remember this as you begin your new teaching career: You will eventually hit this point, also.

For the past three years, during this first week I arrived home after 5:00 p.m. exhausted, scared, and nervous. I had my plan book by my bed so that I could review exactly what I was going to do when my students arrived. I knew I'd shake every single hand, smile until my cheeks hurt, and remember to go over the school code of conduct, the confusing rotating elective schedule, and the lunchroom procedures. As a new teacher, I wrote lists on the palm of my hand so that I'd have my own cheat sheet as I stood in the front of the room meeting my new students for the first time as a new teacher. While the excitement was somewhere below the surface, nerves and fear were floating on top. I'd check and double-check my alarm so that I'd be at school one hour early in order to go over my lists and schedule

one more time. My nametag was sitting by my front door, my classroom keys were hanging around my neck, and my bag was filled with candy just in case I needed a lifesaving trick to lure my students into my room.

I'd look around at the other teachers during this planning week and feel envious because they were sharing stories with old friends and looking very relaxed. Their rooms were already decorated and ready to go, and they simply pulled out last year's plans to use again this year. They actually left the school for lunch and leisurely ate and conversed while I was stuffing a sandwich in my mouth and trying to hang my three posters in the perfect places.

I had to write this essay to assure new teachers that life does get better. And it doesn't take long. My second year was easier than my first, and my third year was even better than my second. But this year—this beautiful year—I am OK. I'm better than OK—I'm good. I'm ready. My alarm is set so that I'll arrive a half-hour early, the coffeepot is set, I'm actually watching television while I'm writing this, and there is nothing written on my palms. I'm excited. I'm ready to shake my students' hands and ease them into the school year. I went out to lunch three times this week, and I sat around a table filled with veteran teachers and chatted about the triathlon I competed in this summer and the vacation I took to New Mexico. I feel good. I feel relief. It gets better, new teachers, I promise.

In the ever-changing world of education, beginning teachers need resources to turn to as they face new, daily challenges. *In the First Few Years: Reflections of a Beginning Teacher* will be that resource. In this collection of 22 essays, author Tina Humphrey shares insights and experiences from her first three years of teaching. The author uses humor, honesty, and compassion to cover topics such as memorable first-year moments, challenging students, heartaches in the classroom, and life outside teaching.

Although Humphrey focuses on the first years of teaching, her reflections will touch teachers new and old. Her inspirational stories will make new teachers feel like they are not alone and will allow veteran teachers to reflect on their own journeys. *In the First Few Years* will provide a place for all teachers to turn in order to laugh, learn, and share to help themselves and, ultimately, their students.

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